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PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHER

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SUBJECT: Imams Versus President Wade's Statue

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A group of 18 Islamic associations in the capital area directed their imams to denounce President Abdoulaye Wade during their December 11, 2009 Friday sermons because he had characterized them as being ignorant in the ways of Islam after they had accused the President's African Renaissance Monument of being idolatrous. End Summary.

¶2. In an usually forceful statement President Wade, who is normally very wary of taking on any members of the religious establishment for fear of alienating voters, labeled a group of imams as theologically ignorant after they remarked that the African Renaissance Monument's depiction of the human form to include a partially clothed female was un-Islamic and degenerate. Wade explained, "In the Koran, it is prohibited to raise a monument and worship it like a god and ask favors from it. But, if it is just to admire its beauty and on top of that make money from it, there is nothing wrong with it."

¶3. In reply, the imams first stood by their interpretation, saying that Islam prohibited the raising of such monuments because it detracts from the worship of God and then they prepared a joint text that their members would read in their respective mosques on Friday; which they did. However, the reaction has so far been muted. A review of the press in the following days failed to turn any major newspaper reporting the story. According to local Embassy staff who attended Friday prayers, the subject was barely mentioned by the imams themselves. One embassy employee reported that his imam touched on the subject for less than one minute in his 30-minute sermon, averring that Senegal had many other moral issues to deal with and then questioned the motives of the imams. In a separate conversation with a leading Mouride religious figure, Poloff was told that, as long as the monument was not worshipped, they did not see a real problem with it.

Comment

¶4. (SBU) As the imams themselves acknowledged, all of the polemic surrounding the monument comes far too late in the day as the statue is finished and almost ready to be dedicated; this may explain the very low-key reaction of the Senegalese people to the imams' objections. Additionally, some question the imams' sincerity, wondering whether or not this is just politics and a ploy to get President Wade to open his coffers to them. An abstract theological argument around whether or not the monument is idolatrous resonates very little as the Senegalese people remain focused on their meager pocketbooks while the government fragrantly wastes public funds to build a statue that to many has come to symbolize the worst Wade's administration has to offer them. End Comment.
Bernicat